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TAGS: ECON ENV EPET ELAB ENRG PGOV ASEC ID  
SUBJECT: EAST JAVA MUD FLOW UPDATE: POLITICS AND RIVER CURRENTS  
COMPETE; REQUEST FOR MONITORING EQUIPMENT

REF: SURABAYA 64 AND PREVIOUS

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This message is sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Sidoarjo mud flow continues to play both a symbolic and tangible role in East Java's political and economic life. The beginning of the rainy season, the increasingly frequent breaches of existing earthen dams, the threats to vital infrastructure, the continuing distrust of the central government's and Lapindo's willingness to resolve the situation, and the disruption of livelihoods have led to increased public and media outrage. Thousands of residents blockaded the main road through Porong town demanding that the Sidoarjo Mud Management Agency (BPLS) immediately halt channeling mud into the Porong River. Local politicians hope to use this issue to their advantage in 2008 elections; while election officials worry that voter registration will be impossible given the wide-scale displacement of residents. BPLS officials expressed concern to the Consulate that BPLS is unable to monitor properly subsidence at the site since much of the monitoring equipment has been transferred to monitor three active volcanoes. BPLS asked if perhaps the USG could help (Para 8). End Summary.

Protesting Against BPLS Mitigation Efforts

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¶2. (SBU) On October 31, an estimated 7,000 residents of Gempol sub-district blocked the main road through Porong town in an attempt to force BPLS to stop diverting mud into the Porong River. According to press reports, the protestors claimed that BPLS had agreed to not only stop piping mud into the Porong, but also to return the river to its original condition within 10 days. In a meeting with Surabaya PolEcon officer the same day, BPLS officials Soffian Hadi and Handoko Teguh expressed doubt about the accuracy of these media reports. Soffian said that BPLS chairman former General Sunarso had instructed BPLS staff not to issue any statements regarding the protestor's demands. Just last week, President Yudhoyono reportedly endorsed the decision to continue diverting mud into the Porong (reftel).

¶3. (SBU) Soffian told us that the popular misperceptions that mud will not be carried out to sea via the Porong River and that

heavy flooding was imminent were exaggerated. On the contrary, BPLS is confident, based on scientific observation, that the mud can be flushed away, albeit slowly, once the river's flow rate increases. Currently, the River's flow rate is still at dry-season levels. BPLS found that the mud was washed downstream more quickly when a dam upstream was opened recently.

Soffian plans to meet with the Governor of East Java to request the Governor guarantee the continuation of BPLS's work in Porong as it is often disrupted by demonstrations, complicating and even preventing mitigation efforts. BPLS will also request the government take responsibility for negotiating with the demonstrators and local residents since BPLS does not have the authority to do so.

**¶4. (SBU)** On November 2, Soffian confirmed to the Consulate that, in response to recent demonstrations, BPLS was limiting its pumping of mud into the Porong to times when the river current was strongest. He explained that at 2330 November 1 and 0300 November 2, BPLS had quietly pumped mud into the river when BPLS staff saw the river current increase following locally heavy rains. He added that BPLS had invited local villagers to witness that the mud was being flushed downstream by the current, and none had objected. Soffian noted that BPLS was not currently pumping mud into the river (the afternoon of November 2), but would resume when the current strengthens.

All Politics Are Local

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**¶5. (SBU)** Soffian suggested that the protestors were being used by local politicians to advance political agendas. He explained that the Regent of Pasuruan, for example, plans to use issues surrounding the mud as part of his campaign platform during the 2008 elections. Politicizing matters further, Lapindo is obligated by presidential decree to complete compensation payments to victims by May 2008, just before the anticipated July 2008 gubernatorial election. The Chairman of the East Java election commission told PolEcon Officer in a separate meeting that the mud flow has made it difficult to register voters in

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the Porong area since all of the local offices at the village and sub-district (kecamatan) level have disappeared. In addition, most of the victims are now scattered in temporary housing throughout the region and as far away as Sulawesi. The Election Commission estimates 45,000 voters have been displaced, excluding victims forced out of their homes in the past month.

Fish Are Dying, Might As Well Turn a Profit

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**¶6. (U)** On November 2, local media reported that a large number of dead fish were floating just upstream from the area where BPLS was diverting mud into the Porong River. According to local media reports, the Sidoarjo District Commission for the Environment explained that pollution levels were rising as pollutants built up in the stretch of river immediately upstream from where the mud entered, thus killing the fish.

**¶7. (SBU)** Syaiful Illah, Deputy Regent of Sidoarjo and a member of the Sidoarjo Fish Pond Association, suggested to local media outlets that the mud could be channeled into neighboring aquaculture ponds instead of the river. These aquaculture areas comprise a band separating the mud containment site from the Strait of Madura. Any plan to use the ponds could create a conduit for the mud substantially wider than the channel provided by the Porong River. Illah, himself an owner of fish ponds in the area, stands to gain if he can convince the government or Lapindo to compensate him for his land. Japanese and European markets refuse to purchase seafood produced in the area due to fear of contamination.

Competing Priorities: Volcano or Mud Flow

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**¶8. (SBU)** BPLS is having difficulty monitoring the level of

subsidence at the mud flow site and in turn anticipating breaches in the earthen dams. Soffian told us that many of the monitoring devices used previously have been transferred to monitor increased activity at three volcanoes: Mt. Kelud in East Java, Mt. Soputan in North Sulawesi, and Anak Krakatau. While funds to purchase equipment has been earmarked in the BPLS budget, the central government has yet to disburse the funds and no timetable has been set. Soffian asked if perhaps the USG would have equipment available in the meantime.

MCCLELLAND